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## Rather Than a Bedtime Story

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## Rather Than a Bedtime Story

Joslynn Howard

Count to ten, she whispers.

We start with my toes,  
curling and cringing.

I cannot sleep.

This is my bedtime ritual,  
tightening every muscle until  
they are snug against my  
young bones. Inhale,

count to ten, hold, release.  
Mother teaches me how to  
shake the fear from my  
skeleton. I tremble.

Facing skyward, I clench  
my heart to prevent it from  
breaking free. I cannot sleep.

What if he comes in my dreams?

Count to ten, repeat.  
I worry that he will  
reap my skin again  
without my permission.

I cannot dream of anything  
but his hands, stealing flesh.  
I contract every fiber, each loose  
end, constricting myself inwards.

He can no longer hurt you,  
she whispers, count to ten  
and go to sleep. But I ache.  
Mind and body revolting,

I have not slept in weeks.